Behavioral Risk Factors and Disparities in Health among Lesbian and Bisexual Women

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Definition of Sexual Minority Women

- **Sexual Minority Women (SMW):** lesbians, bisexuals, women who partner with women, and women who have sex with women.

- **Lesbian:** “women whose emotional, social, and sexual relationships are primarily with women”.

- **Bisexual women:** “women who have the potential for attraction to both men and women and are attracted to the individual rather than a person of a particular biologic sex or gender”.

Phillips-Angeles et al., 2004; Tucker et al., 1995;
Sexual Minority Women’s Health

- Is it unnecessary to identify a woman as a sexual minority woman in a consultation?
  - Intrusive and should be avoided
  - Problem: Sexual Minority Group influences certain patterns of health and illness.
    - Influences health seeking behavior, health risk factors, and specific health issues.
    - Delays screening, diagnosis, and treatment of various conditions.

McNair, 2003; Stevens, 1995
Experiences of Discrimination

- Various Forms:
  - Sexism, racism, and classism
  - Homophobia
  - Heterosexism

- Minority Stress
  - Hate crimes, victimization, stress of concealing and/or disclosing, and internalized homophobia

Balsam, 2003; DiPlacido, 1998; McNair, 2003
Mental Illness

- Depression
- Anxiety Disorders
- Negative Affect
- Suicidal Ideation

- Differences between lesbian and bisexual women
  - Some data suggests that bisexual women may have higher prevalence rates of mental illness than lesbian women

Balsam et al., 2005; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Volpp, 2010
Use of Tobacco, Alcohol, and other Drugs

- Higher levels of alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco use and greater symptoms of substance misuse than heterosexual women.
  - Gender atypical self-presentation differences
    - Butch women: May experience greater discrimination, engage in male role behaviors, and socializing in substance-using settings.

Burgard et al., 2005; Trocki et al., 2009; Rosario et al., 2008;
Breast and Ovarian Cancer

- **Hypothesis: SMW may have higher rates of breast cancer**
  - Higher rates of behavioral risk factors: obesity, alcohol consumption, lower parity, higher rates of endometriosis, lack of contraceptive use, and lower rates of screening.

- **Hypothesis: SMW may be at increased risk for ovarian cancer**
  - Higher rates of behavioral risk factors: lower frequency of childrearing, lack of oral contraceptive use, lack of access of health care, lower utilization of the health care system, and possibly the use of fertility drugs.

Boyd, 2001; Case et al., 2004
HPV, Cervical Cancers, and Sexually Transmitted Infection’s (STI)

- Bacterial Vaginosis, Trichomonas, Yeast, Herpes, and Gonorrhea.
- STI’s and HPV have been well documented among sexual minority women who have never had sex with men.
  - Transmission has occurred through orogenital sex, vaginal penetration with fingers, and sharing sex toys with partners.
- Perceptions of STIs
- HIV transmission among lesbian women is unclear but bisexual women do have the highest rate of seropositivity when compared to lesbian and heterosexual women.

Bailey et al., 2004; Marrazzo et al., 2005; Solarz, 1999
Heart Disease, Stroke, and General Cancer

Higher rates of behavioral risk factors include:

- Increased Body Mass
- Higher rates of Obesity
- Higher rates of cigarette smoking

Case, et al., 2004; Valanis et al., 2000
Health Seeking Behavior and Utilization of the Health Care System

- Less likely to seek and receive preventative health care
  - Includes blood pressure assessments, cholesterol screening exams, breast exams, pap smears, and mammography.
- Delay treatment
- Less likely to have a regular general practitioner.

Koh, 2000; Rankow & Tessaro, 1998
Barriers Contributing to Underutilization

- Client-Provider Relationship
  - Client disclosing sexuality
  - Provider’s negative attitudes toward sexual minority women or failing to inquire about sexual orientation
- False beliefs among sexual minority women and providers
- Health Insurance
  - Difficulty obtaining health insurance
  - Unemployment

Cochran et al., 2001; Klitzman & Greenberg, 2002; Marrazzo et al., 2005; Roberts et al., 2004; Stevens, 1992
Methodological Issues

- **Sampling**
  - Often from selected populations

- **Definition and measurement of sexual identity and behavior**

- **Lack of control or comparison groups**
  - Limits generalizability of findings and ability to infer causal relationships

Sell & Petrulio, 1996
Future Direction

- Definition of sexual identity and behavior
- Including detailed information on large surveys
- Attitudes and practices regarding nutrition, exercise, smoking, and weight.
- Health care provider inquiry about sexual orientation
- Investigate new factors that may be contributing to underutilization of health care system
References


